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***Argumentum ad Misericordiam* – the Critical Intimacies of Victimhood**

Abstract

This article discusses the widespread use of victim tropes in contemporary Anglo-American culture by using cultural theory to analyse key social media memes circulating on Facebook in 2015. Since the growth of social media, victim stories have been proliferating, and each demands a response. Victim narratives are rhetorical, they are designed to elicit pity and shame the perpetrator. They are deployed to stimulate political debate and activism, as well as to appeal to an all-purpose humanitarianism. Victimology has its origins in Law and Criminology, but this paper opens up the field more broadly to think about the cultural politics of victimhood, to consider how the victim-figure can be appropriated by/for different purposes, particularly racial and gender politics, including in the case of Rachel Dolezal, and racial passing. In formulating an ethical response to the lived experience of victims, we need to think about the different kinds of critical intimacies elicited by such media.

Keywords

Victimhood; shame; social media; cultural politics

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Introduction

Like most academics I spend an unfeasible amount of time procrastinating when I should be doing research, including engaging on Facebook, the social media of choice for the over-50s. I am ‘following’ on Newsfeed various activist sites, and a significant number of daily posts that I read are what could be characterised as ‘victim media’. Here, I’m defining victim media as texts, circulating in the public sphere, that present a figure of injury that hails the viewer and inculcates in her/him a feeling of pity. An appeal to pity – *argumentum ad misericordiam* – is when the recipient’s emotions are mobilised in order to win an argument. Aroused in the viewer are emotional responses that as a secondary effect, can mobilize collective feelings of shame/shaming, and retribution. Victim media constitute a genre of popular representation, they are ubiquitous to media industries and subcultural or oppositional discourses; their circulation is designed to elicit moral responses and create new audiences of outrage in the court of public opinion. This works through the process of identification. Actually, there are two processes involved: of identification with the victim, and critical disidentification with the perpetrator. Victim media does stuff: it is a speech act that elicits feeling, and it compels further dissemination in order to increase feeling. It is a form of remote witnessing, and has been disparagingly called ‘clicktivism’, an evaluation that is affiliated with the disparagement of popular culture from the standpoint of bourgeois *anomie*. Nevertheless, social media users are encountering victim stories in unprecedented quantities, we have never had a time quite like this before. In this article I will be considering victim media, media victims, and the mobilising power of victimhood, which is operant through the prism of shame. My case study material is selected as indicative content of key, trending, social media memes circulating on one social/global media site (Facebook, the world’s largest with one billion active users) during Spring/Summer 2015.

Angry White Men

It is nearly a decade since the right-wing British think-tank Civitas produced its polemical and clumsily entitled *We’re (Nearly) All Victims Now* (2006), in which its Director David Green stated:

Everyone wants to be a victim, now that victim status brings preferential treatment, compensation, immunity from criticism, and the services of the police force and the courts to intimidate those who insult you. (2006; back cover)

Green, a libertarian, posed the dubious calculation that 73% of the British population were now categorised as ‘victims’, arguing that such group victimhood is incompatible with a national heritage of liberal democracy, in which the individual is the primary agent. He concluded by calling contemporary society a “victimocracy”, based on the common-sense idea that victims gain legitimacy, and a privileged status due to ‘inherited’ characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality. In Green’s view victimhood is a political tool in contemporary claims against the state. He argued that this state of play entrenches social divisions and creates a carnival out of oppression; Green enquires whether “the victims [have] become the oppressors, as [George] Orwell warned?” (2006; ix). and co-opts Orwell’s famous aphorism that “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”ⁱ. Thus does neoliberalism present an inverted view of society, with subjugated groups supposedly enacting the Terror in their pursuit of ‘Everyman’, for retribution.

Green’s paranoid masculinity belongs in the territory of Angry White Men (AWMs), a social category identified in the USA in the 1990s which described the backlash by neo-conservative men against the liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly feminism. By this time, a watered down version of their precepts had become embedded within equal opportunities policies of the global North. The shield of victimhood was re-enlisted by AWMs (particularly in the USA), who rightly perceived a threat to their dominant white masculinity. They flocked to talk radio in the USA, fabricating “political correctness”, and complaining about the “pussification of America”. AWM’s perceived marginalisation has resulted in the twenty-first century growth of grassroots Tea Party Republicanism, in a classic piece of *ressentiment*. Micheal Kimmel (2013) interviewed dozens of them for his book *Angry White Men*, concluding that AWMs suffered from an “aggrieved entitlement” to a loss of benefits that they believed to be rightfully theirs, their anachronistic and nostalgic grasp of masculinity and whiteness having being superseded by more flexible, pluralistic versions. The actual losses of working class men, crystallised by the destruction of labour and industry and the changing faces of masculinity, has led to

much misdirected rage against ‘Femi-Nazis’ and ‘Mulch-iculturalism’. The alienation of AWMs, and more worryingly, young AWMs or YAWMs, has seen their anger and frustration spiral into even more victimised subjectivities. (This is also rendered in the cycle of abuse, of course, that perpetrators of abuse almost always see themselves as victims.)

Now, we see dominant groups, and even government propaganda, frequently using persecutory rhetoric in public discourse to mobilize support. Parallel to this is the political economy and institutionalisation of victimhood, in the huge industry of legal professionals involved in fomenting a compensation culture, a culture of blame. Third sector organisations are also part of that political economy, working on behalf of victims, becoming their proxies, the strong protecting the weak (in all of the complex relations of patronage and benefaction that arise). This raises of course some difficult policy dilemmas, as the rights of the individual can become incompatible with the rights of the social group.

The Micro-aggressions of Daily Life

Recently Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning (2014) have argued for the emergence of a global victimhood culture that is distinct from the honour cultures and dignity cultures anthropologists identified in the past. Their research has gathered evidence of what Derald Wing Sue (2010) has previously called the “micro-aggressions” of daily life:

...the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. (2010, 5)

The presence of such micro-aggressions mobilised outrage in the past few years particularly on US university student campus blogs, which exposed and shamed supposed instances of offensive conduct. Campbell and Manning point out that such online disclosures have sought to attract more powerful third parties (such as university managers) in order to mobilise their support. More problematically, Campbell and Manning assert that “these tactics sometimes involve building a case for action by documenting, exaggerating, or even falsifying offenses.” (2014, 695). The result, they say, begets “a culture of victimhood in which individuals and groups

display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance” (ibid). They argue that the relative cultural empowerment of North American university students demonstrates their ethos of entitlement, and that actually the “real” socially disadvantaged are too inferior to bother with appeals to a higher status third party for support, as they are so unlikely to receive it.

The authors describe how on these online blogs victimhood is perceived as virtuous, and that it raises the moral status of the victim. They argue that the culture of victimhood is most entrenched on university campuses, as environments that are keenly concerned with social status. I think that Campbell and Manning have a point – that student politics are certainly intense and young people can be perceived as having fragile ego-formation. However, their study collapses all cultural insults together as equivalent, and fails to recognise the historical processes of social change that such protests can mobilize.ⁱⁱ Micro-aggressions can chip away at the soul, forming little fragments of shame that sever a sense of connection. Micro-aggressions can then push people together in shame formations that consolidate victimhood, yes, but consequentially the energy and emotion mobilised can make new kinds of connections (Munt 2007). Think how galvanising a physical insult can be, consider how the body races to the site, how the blood rushes in, how the heartbeat quickens and the adrenaline flash-floods, all in order to make new, reparative structures.

Conversely, such discourses can feed the AWM. Take this recent email to the British *Guardian* newspaper from an anonymous American academic – presumably, a colleague:

I’m a liberal-left college professor in the social sciences. I’m going to vote for Trump but I won’t tell hardly anybody.

My main reason is anger at the two-party system and the horrible presidencies of Obama and Bush. But I’m also furious at political correctness on campus and in the media.

I’m angry at forced diversity and constant, frequently unjustified complaints about racism/sexism/homophobia/lack of trans rights. I’m particularly angry at social justice warriors and my main reason to vote Trump is to see the looks on your faces when he wins.

It's not that I like Trump. It's that I hate those who can't stand him. I want them to suffer the shock of knowing all their torrents of blog posts and Tumblr bitch-fests and "I just can't..." and accusations of mansplaining didn't actually matter. That they're still losing. And that things are not getting better for them. They're getting worse. (3rd March 2016) ⁱⁱⁱ

Envy, hatred, fury, the desire to humiliate – all emotions allied to shame. This man is *ashamed* and his response is to enact revenge through reverse victimisation.

Archetypal Victim Tropes

Victimhood is ideologically neutral, such is its manipulability, that it can be appropriated by and for anyone with a grievance. I am concerned here to identify something of how victims get recognised, by whom and for what purpose. Despite being an unfilled sign, it has some customary deployments and clichéd configurations, I suggest a brief, initial typography here:

i) The Abject White Man

Western cultures have been predominantly Christian for nearly two thousand years, a foundational belief system that owns as its primary icon a victim, perhaps The Victim – the persecuted Christ. The Biblical gospels portray the humiliation and suffering of Christ's last days, as he conveyed the heavy cross through the spitting and jeering crowds. Simulacra of his death from crucifixion adorn hundreds of millions of buildings and homes across the globe, it is the most ubiquitous sign in the world. The colonial era has ensured that this image of the noble victim has disseminated across all parts of the earth. Radical Christians are urged to participate in what is called 'victim theology', a revalorisation of the deprived, the derided, and the downtrodden, indeed, following a long spiritual tradition of humiliation, Christians are invited to become like Jesus himself, to abase themselves and draw joy from carrying their own metaphoric crosses. This abject white man is a figure of religious glory, because suffering brings reward. Christians can value this symbolic power of victims, and through them, acquire a bit of reflected holiness. Nowadays, the link between religious practise and ordinary life is more tenuous, however this valorisation of victimhood remains an undercurrent in western belief systems, and it is underpinned by the masochistic masculinity of a man who is *wronged*.^{iv}

ii) The Good White Woman/Bad Black Man

The archetypal good victim remains the respectable, cisgendered white woman. Think, for example, of those early flickering film clips of a steam train thundering toward a virgin tied to the tracks. Think also of the history of lynching in the southern United States, where even looking at a 'pure' white woman could result in being at the end of a rope. The archetype of the pure white feminine victim is endemic to Anglo-American media cultures. The inverse logic of this white woman victim ensures a black male perpetrator, a narrative structure that forms part of the western, overtly North American, racial unconscious, and is made self-evident in the association of young black males with criminality and gangs. In Europe, this binary is just as likely to be the Good White Woman/Bad *Brown* Man as indicated by the moral panic around the alleged sexual assaults by refugees in the German city of Cologne on New Years Eve.^v Thus we can also see how the sign of victim can transfer across different injured subjectivities, where it can affix according to culturally specific binaries and nationally specific imperialist histories.

In Katheryn Russell-Brown's book *The Color of Crime* (2009) she describes a number of racial hoaxes in the USA, ninety-two cases between 1987 and 2006. A racial hoax is said to take place either when someone fabricates a crime and blames it on another person because of his race, or when an actual crime has been committed and the perpetrator falsely blames someone because of his race. The majority of racial hoaxes are involving white people who accuse black people falsely of committing a crime (63%). In 12% of cases, hoaxers were officers of the court or police. Russell-Brown describes how:

In one hoax incident that defies classification, a White Louisiana woman told police that she had been sexually assaulted by a Black man. She said the attacker had a tattoo of a serpent on his arm. A police sketch of the rapist was widely circulated in Baton Rouge. In a bizarre twist, *twenty-eight* other women notified the police that they, too, had been assaulted by the imaginary "serpent man". The high number of copycat victims suggests more than the usual hysteria associated with criminals on the loose. Within days, the alleged victim confessed that she had made up the rape story. (2009, 107)

Russell-Brown also mentions cases in which white perpetrators dress up in Blackface in order to commit crime and have their guilt racially displaced.

iii) The Child

Children are universally invoked as victims, but the veracity of their victimhood is racially verified: consider the global media hysteria concerning the missing middle class white English girl Madeleine McCann, who was snatched from Praia da Luz, Portugal in 2007. Dubbed “Missing White Woman Syndrome” by broadcaster and political analyst Gwen Ifill, there have been various studies of media disproportionality by scholars who critique the racialization of such victims (including Liebler 2010). Certainly the disappearance of “Madeleine” represented the classic narrative of a fairy-tale blonde little girl abductee. Girls tend to be over-represented in the media as victims of abuse, whereas boys are primarily represented as troublemakers or perpetrators.^{vi} The ‘starving African child’ is a cliché of charity fundraising, cementing the colonialist fantasy of African dependency; indeed not only are children often victims, but victims are often infantilised, irrespective of age.

Recognition/Misrecognition

The flip side of staking a claim of victimhood is the equally gendered snare of sexual crimes going disbelieved, and genuine victims going unrecognised. Even as I reluctantly deploy that word ‘genuine’ – or its synonyms ‘real, undisputable, true, legitimate, actual, valid’ - and so on, it presses the issue of the victim dilemma: that of sorting out the authentic victim from the inauthentic. There is a credibility compulsion attached to victimhood, an anxious unverifiability in which the public is required to judge both the severity and legitimacy of the rhetoric being deployed.^{vii} Each and every victim meme requires the viewer to judge its legitimacy, using the scopophilic dynamics of recognition, misrecognition, and wilful misrecognition. Victimhood is a hook, a rhetorical device, and crucially a structure of asymmetrical, non-reciprocal recognition – something which Hegel (1977) was onto when he wrote about the master/slave dialectic. The rise of the politics of recognition is of course historically congruent with the rise of neoliberalism, heralding the supremacy of the individual; thus an emergent subjectivity is intrinsically dependent on recognition, on an act of (self)-representation, of mutual co-constitution, of seeing things for what they are (or, via misrecognition or misrepresentation, are not).

Perhaps this accounts for why so many people are fascinated by the ‘face’ of victimhood. When news of a massacre breaks out on broadcast news, the viewer holds her breath until the faces of the victims can be seen, which supplies essential emotional veracity. Faces trigger empathy more easily than the nebulousness of a group or the “faceless hordes”, the root of empathy is from the German *Einfühlung*, literally “feeling into”, like looking into someone’s eyes. The face of Cecil the Lion with his jewelled eyes and flowing black mane garnered worldwide protest about the colonial tradition of canned shooting in Africa, in summer 2015; Cecil was juxtaposed with the face of the guilty, the wicked shiny-toothed dentist, for the faces of the guilty also have to be displayed, for purposes of shame (Munt 2007). The social media sharer is performing a speech act, one that declaims to the perpetrator “I shame you”. The victim trope is always addressed to an audience, it hails the viewer and because of shame’s seepage, shame’s contagion, the viewer becomes inculcated with this shame, a co-opted member of a shaming collectivity. Included in this shame is awareness of voyeurism, perhaps invoking a third shame, and perhaps even a taste of *schadenfreude* – delight at the misfortune of others. These are all reflective movements, of the self-regarding-self, and the self appraising the other; it is also why the faceless are seen as shameless, and covering the face implies shame. (Munt 2007)

Victimising the Female ‘Other’

The Internet’s power to shame infamously kicked off a decade earlier in 2005 with uploaded mobile phone footage of the “Dog Poop Girl”. This unfortunate South Korean student violated norms by not cleaning up after her dog on the subway. Her subsequent global humiliation forced her to quit university, and threaten suicide if the subsequent online harassment and misogyny didn’t stop.^{viii} The relentless stream of miscellaneous injustices on social media requires instant reactions to ‘like’ or ‘share’, creating momentary global juries. On the face of it, this is what Habermas has critiqued as the refeudalization of the public sphere, the idea that media create a chimeric public where none existed. The outrage is transient, but it mobilises feeling in a way that is structured by the grammar of Newsfeed, as byte sized portions of indignance. Like the eye of Sauron, social media algorithms show us what is trending, what memes to click, the technology responsive to human attention – and what is rolling gathers speed. It can breed social reinforcement on a grand and

frightening scale. Even public shaming itself has itself been parodied, with the Internet meme of dog shaming that first appeared in 2012.

Let us pause to consider one recent and notorious example of victim media – the case of another colleague, the African-American rights activist, Rachel Dolezal, her exposé and her subsequent global shaming. Dolezal was the President of the Spokane branch of the august USA National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. She was also a professor of African American Studies at the Eastern Washington University. Despite having white Czech and German ancestry (with arguably, ‘one drop’ of Native American blood^{ix}), Dolezal, who grew up with black adopted siblings and who married a black man, describes herself as either black or mixed race. In 2015 the broadcast, independent and social media – and particularly right-wing media - became fixated with this story of a “disgraced race activist”, the fulcrum of which was an interview with her white parents in which they exposed her racial identity as a ‘fake’ and suggested she seek professional help. Dolezal has clearly identified with African American culture and identity most of her adult life, including attending Howard University to study African American art. We might conject that in her career she has developed a strong identification with social justice and indeed with victims, for whatever reason. There are unverifiable comments on social media that Dolezal felt that her black siblings were racially abused by her parents, which caused her longstanding indignation, and perhaps her white shame.^x So – Rachel Dolezal felt herself to be a victim, she identified with victims, and this led her to her downfall and consequent extreme victimisation by global media which exposed her victimism as a lie (and by association, discrediting race activists en masse).

Such supposed unmaskings are intended to shame the perpetrator into a confession. But Dolezal resolutely continues to insist that she is black, and lives as black, irrespective of her genetic parentage. She also refuses the media’s disciplinary urge to ‘put her in her place’, for she is a woman who ‘will not be told’. Presumably Dolezal will be aware of Malcolm X’s cry, “I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream – I see an American nightmare”. The case of Dolezal tackled the common-sense that ‘race’ is intrinsic, and written on the body, it raised to public view the instability of ‘race’, and the (white) world strongly objected. Dolezal

still hangs onto the ‘truth’ of her own blackness, via her purposeful identification with her black siblings and her critical disidentification with her white parents. In spite of the public protests; what she refuses to relinquish is not just her transferential victimhood but also the political voice she has found by dint of it. Whether that voice will be permitted to continue to speak remains moot, as she has been removed from her posts.

Performing race/performing victims

Racial passing, or performing whiteness, has a long history, of course, in which ‘black’ people are assumed to pass themselves off as ‘white’ in order for social advancement. Less well known is the practise of ‘white’ people passing as ‘black’, and so ill-known in fact that many people took Rachel Dolezal’s actions to being an isolated case, framing it as some kind of mental instability (femininity and madness being discursively linked^{xi}). Yet minstrelsy and blackface has been part of western popular culture for 150 years.^{xii} Minstrelsy operates on a central conceit, that cultural forms can be performed and exchanged, untying the knot of corporeal authenticity but also challenging the idea that cultural forms can be ‘owned’. Minstrelsy has attracted heated debate, for example in the case of Cornwall’s ‘Darkie Days’ where local residents blacken their faces and tour the town singing songs.^{xiii} Minstrelsy differs from Dolezal’s case however because in this self-conscious theatrical performance the racial crossing is done as trickery, or parody, and framed as inauthentic.^{xiv} Perhaps Dolezal’s intentions were initially along the lines of John Howard Griffin’s story in *Black Like Me* (1961), in which a white man stained his face and hitch-hiked through the American Deep South, in order to better comprehend racism; we don’t know. Maybe she doesn’t know.

In the case of Dolezal, apparently, white people could not consciously comprehend why a white person would *want* to pretend to be black, yet racial envy has played its historical part in postcolonial and orientalist structures of desire. In her book *Near Black: White to Black Passing in American Culture* (2008) Baz Dreisinger explored the history of what Philip Brian Harper (1998) had previously named “reverse race passing”, from the 1830s to the present. Central to this cultural phenomenon is the notion of proximity. She argued that Blackness is seen in US culture as transmittable, “proximity to blackness is invested in the power to turn whites black” (2008,3). This

is reminiscent of the disease model, or the idea of contagion that is so common in homophobia (that proximity to homosexuality will make you gay).

For those whites that do cross over, there is the interesting spectre of *white shame*, which provokes identification with blackness (coveted) and disidentification with whiteness (reviled). This idea of whiteness as lack imagines black potency as a compensation for shame. Blackness can be performatively inscribed on a white male or female body with skin darkening (tanning or dyeing), with hairstyles, and with mannerisms that sediment into bodily habitus. I can well imagine how a shamed personality yearning to connect might have had trouble with the entitlement of white privilege, and yearn for the healing glow of black solidarity. Perhaps blackness in this instance operates as a *cover*, in multiple senses: a disguise and a sheath, a shelter and insurance. Dreisinger concluded that:

An ever-growing number of white Americans have entered the twenty-first century wearing, in one form or another, blackness. The desire to sport some popular conception of “blackness” – to engage in what Ishmael Reed has called “cultural tanning” – has become one of the defining features of youth culture. (2008, 121-2)

Adolescence: that uncomfortable stage when your whole personality is a crucible of victimhood. How convenient then, to draw down media representations and carve out an image of street blackness fresh from Chicago, an intoxicating masculinity that covers up this shame. This is a different kind of victim manoeuvre, to renounce one’s culture of entitlement (white, middle class boy from Swansea to hip hop gangsta via Jive Filter^{xv}), and affect a new urban sensibility from ‘below’. To some extent black culture - or perhaps more accurately North American black masculinity - has simply become popular culture, so that what was formerly considered ‘authentically’ black is now not so clearly so. US black masculinities have provided a potent lexicon for insecure white masculinities, and this trope has travelled to Europe.^{xvi} Significantly, this racial passing does not work as well for girls.

Despite the vaunted “post-racial” America, Dreisinger, toward the end of the book, remarks:

The fact is, when it comes to talking about race, most of us speak out of both sides of our mouth. We are against race, yes, but we also like our solid selves. How, after all, does one actually live in a racial free-for-all, a world in which all identity, as Samira Kawash puts it, is “not what we are but what we are passing for”?^{xvii} ... Race, rigid and old hat, lives on in our hearts and minds. Slay something – blackness, whiteness, Latino-ness – in concept and you still haven’t slain it in the flesh. (2008, 125)

“Race” remains a social imperative, it is not voluntary and it is not possible to live outside of its discipline or avoid its subjection, but it is possible to challenge the discourse, because racial identities, to bowdlerize Butler’s (1992) *Gender Trouble*, are performative, always vulnerable to reinscription, and always lived as an act of passing. Aren’t we all just a little tainted with Rachel Dolezal’s white shame, rendering her unable to pass flawlessly as ‘properly’ black, or white?

The Political Utility of Victim-bodies

There have been other famous cases in older media in which individuals have felt drawn to inscribe the role of victim, that have used ‘race’ or ethnicity as a framework to pass, and who have been exposed and shamed by an angry public. Curiously, the literary genre of pain and suffering, “misery lit”, which is assumed to be narrowly biographical, and usually adopts the form of *bildungsroman*^{xviii}, is somewhat notorious for victim hoaxes. There have been a number of books that claim to be stories of protagonist’s experiences that have been exposed and shamed as fakes, or part-fakes, and even one whose author won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The cult novel *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) was a bestseller at a point in time when non-white women’s narratives gained limited popularity within the liberal intelligentsias of the USA and Europe, following the gains made by feminism and the left-wing protest movements of the 1970s. It concerns a Guatemalan peasant whose taped memories were transcribed, translated and edited by a French anthropologist. David Stoll, a US anthropologist, wrote an exposé or refutation of Menchú’s story in 1999 that documented how the book operated to serve the needs of the ideological Left in Guatemala and fomented the vision of Latin American revolution that mobilized foreign support for the insurgency. He also cautioned how the image of voiceless victimhood presented through the character of Menchú herself - the symbol created - of sacred sacrifice, nurtured western projections of subaltern

subjects. It took a white man to expose a brown woman's lies. In 1997, Menchú herself disavowed the narrative, and accused her editor Elisabeth Burgos of distortion, claiming "That is not my book".

The construction of the victim has been a powerful organising symbol for many political and human rights movements, as James Baldwin wrote in 1976 "the victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he or she has become a threat".^{xix} This is something that Radclyffe Hall must have grasped all too well after the 1928 trial for obscenity for *The Well of Loneliness* (1926), the first lesbian novel.^{xx} The first film about homosexuality, *Victim* (1961) starring Dirk Bogarde and Sylvia Sims did much to mobilize awareness after the 1957 Wolfenden Report and support the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in the UK 1967 Sexual Offences Act. The tragic homosexual, often in a bohemian context, is a stereotype of sexual representation, and in 1950s and 1960s pulp fiction, its female counterpart the butch lesbian, like *Sister George*, almost always ended her life in shame, despair and/or suicide. Richard Dyer has written about the representation of the sad young man as a gay stereotype, observing that it may be that there is also something specifically white about him,

[T]he sad young man's difference from black gay men is stressed and this perhaps has to do with the stereotype's roots in Christianity and the Romantic poets... The sad young man becomes part of much wider constructions of white identity in terms of suffering (the burden which becomes the badge of our superiority. (2002, 124)

A pale, ill male body with downcast eyes is associated with limp femininity, passivity, and emotionality. The stereotype of the white, middle class American man dying nobly of AIDS has been a stock character since the 1980s. It is linked representationally to Christ's male masochism, mentioned above. Dyer talks about this "delicious melancholia" (2002, 134), and the wistful pleasures of identifying with him.

As the era of comprehensive homosexual shame becomes more remote from the everyday experiences of young western and urban queers, there appears to be less necessity for such victim presentations, and more interest in playing with shame and victimhood as an erotic or existential device. Recuperating victimhood by creating

agentic victims seems like a skilful response to global shaming. An early instance of this shift was seen in the rise of queer cinema in the 1990s, typically in the Jean Genet-inspired spitting scene in the prison garden in *Poison* (1991). However, erotic teasing using shame/victimhood conjunctions, seems chiefly to be a preoccupation of gay white men, who appear to be queering the male masochism/femininity victim-motif. Whereas white lesbians have in the past experimented with victim/shame tropes – such as in Catherine Opie’s photography (1993) – such images seem to relate more viscerally to abuse (indeed, the motif of sexual victimhood seems to have shifted discursively away from homosexuality toward child sexual abuse). Black lesbian photographers, such as South African Zanele Muholi appear to prefer heroic modes, facial portraits, and the aesthetics of presence, that in her own words constitute “visual activism... so that future generations will know that we were here” (2010, 6).^{xxi}

The Emotional Life of Victimhood

Counter-intuitively, victimhood can make us feel good. *The Guardian* journalist Barbara Ellen has had this to say about the social media outcry after the death of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe in July 2015:

I’m not sure how I feel about what appears to be hordes of self-glorifying mourners wailing over the fate of one beautiful animal.

Is this really about Cecil or about what could be termed selective compassion – one animal’s death chosen to illustrate just how kind, sensitive and wonderful humans can be?

Let’s be clear, I’m disgusted by this killing. What an inadequate, loser-subspecies hunters must be. However, this goes beyond hunters, to the mawkish, censorious droves mourning celebrity lion Cecil, seemingly above all other screwed-over animals.

Are most of these people aware – do they even care – that there are innumerable incidents of perfectly legal animal cruelty, systemic exploitation and botched slaughter going on all the time?

Ellen sees self-aggrandisement in the act of clicking and sharing, she rebukes the Internet hordes for their hypocrisy, lauding one dead lion whilst they tuck into industrially farmed meat. Participating in rituals of vicarious loss can give a frisson of excitement, think for example of taphophiles, those many people whom just love

attending funerals, or indeed professional mourners. Curiosity is said to be “morbid” and much of the Internet is driven by ‘dark tourism’, a testament to the idea that viewing victims (especially those that have died from violence) is compulsive, entertaining, and rewarding. Could our attraction to the macabre spring from a desire to experience vicariously the suffering of others? I think so. It gives us visual control over victimhood, and allows us to objectify our fears by locating them on the unfortunate bodies of others.

Victimhood can garner strange forms of prestige. Feminism has judiciously deployed the victim/agency binary since its First Wave, starting with the force-fed hunger strikers, and with the death of Emily Davison.^{xxii} As a young woman, I experienced the Second Wave Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1980s, which, in a misguided response to identity politics, to be a working class, disabled, black lesbian was assumed to mean holding a kind of “top trumps” (although I never saw people of this description actually claiming it). This inverted logic was reminiscent of the Christian rituals of self-abasement and masochism I mentioned earlier (“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many may be called, but few chosen”^{xxiii}). I remember an arms-length envy of those perceived to occupy low status, but generally it was the women with relative privilege playing such cards. From that time, there were examples of men who claimed that they were HIV positive, when they were not; women who claimed that they were raped, when they were not. Troubling identifications that speak to unaccountable vulnerabilities, in which victimhood conferred temporary prestige (people who persist in such orientations are very wearing). However, despite the reproaches of neoliberal 1990s feminists from writers such as Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, and Kate Roiphe, such incidents of victim feminism were small and insignificant compared to the real political changes achieved in my lifetime.

Victimhood has a vexed temporality. Sometimes being a victim is a temporary thing that passes almost as soon as the offending event. But victimhood can be sticky, it can be an action that transposes into an identity. For someone who was killed by a terrorist action, the event of their death will synopsis their whole life. Victimhood can affix an identity in time, drowning out other aspects of their past, congealing emotions of rage, resentment, disgust and disgrace. Victimhood can also comprise a

pluperfect rupture in identity that goes forward through time, so that it permeates the self-to-be – determining that you are the person to whom stuff happened (and you always will be). Victimhood owns this imaginary duration; there are common expectations that prescribe temporal limits for victimhood to be claimed – so that rules exist of appropriate ‘periods’ of victimhood. States of injury are accorded generally agreed temporal limits, after which victimhood is deemed pathological – in a “Miss Havisham Syndrome” perhaps (Charles Dickens, 1861). It is helpful to think of victimhood as having a perimeter of value, because victimhood can cling on for too long, there can be a victim trail, a smokescreen or psychic smell that can obscure other issues.

The analysis of crowd psychology was noted over a century ago by an unpleasantly racist misogynist, Gustav Le Bon (1895) who identified the three phases of the crowd as submergence, contagion and suggestion. All of these elements can be seen in a social media virtual crowd today, similarly with the Freudian (1921/1981) claim that crowds can unlock the unconscious mind. There is a deep seated bourgeois fear of these ‘masses’, think for example of how Adorno argued that the masses were the artificial and feminised product of a ‘managed’ modern life. Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1987) observed how disparate crowd opinion comes together in “emergent norm theory”, which, after some initial chatter, deindividuates the voices and consolidates into a group. Victims are required by their own redemptive powers to become survivors or even victors, demonstrating their resilience over their own fates. I think the story of how people live with shame in an on-going, unresolved way - especially when they are so often involved with (and/or are read within) narratives of mandatory progress - is largely unexplored.^{xxiv} Heather Love (2009) has argued that trauma and loss in queer history requires our greater attention and compassion, needing further development in order to understand how race, gender and class might render such shame narratives differently. Perhaps we are required to mobilize politically *against* being shamed via tropes of victimhood, whilst also maintaining a mindful attitude to the presence of embodied shame in victimised individuals, neither requiring them to ‘improve’ nor being complacent about their suffering either.

Victim Media - the Moment and the Movement

We are well acquainted with the propensity of dominant subjectivities to bully the victimised Other, indeed, in what lamentably used to be called the “First World” at the moment migrants, refugees and asylum seekers form easy targets of blame for our economic and personal insecurities. These shadowy, hooded and faceless men filmed in night-vision like hunted animals are presented as archetypal threats: black, stereotypically gendered villains who wish to steal our citizenship.^{xxv} Visually, these pictures evoke how Chamayou (2012) has linked the practice and discourse of hunting to colonial relations. Despite these dystopian anxieties, I believe that the digital agora can mobilise something of a democratic urge, when public feeling gains critical mass. Shaming is very bonding, it allows people to experience collective emotion, to gain recognition and social validity. On social media during 2015 there was an unprecedented appeal to such moral sentiments, in part sparked by the social media meme of the drowned body of a child on a Greek beach, 3 year-old Alan Kurdi, we saw ordinary Europeans reach a ‘tipping point’ of empathy. Tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilised in support for the refugees fleeing war in Syria, who were stumbling, hungry and cold, into and through southern Europe.^{xxvi} In the face of national governments’ unconscionable protectionism, different national publics across the continent were galvanised by compassion for this victim-figure, to generate ground-up, cooperative efforts to relieve the suffering of refugees. We don’t yet know what the longer term outcome of this transient structure of feeling will be, but we do know that through the representational prism of victimhood, and its appeal to pity, for a moment there in 2015, our governments were thoroughly shamed.

Because of shame’s binding propensities, participation in shame can lead to a more radical relationality and politics. In our smoke and mirrored world, victimhood is a highly mediated phenomenon that is built up through insult and wrapped up in shame. Social media renditions of victims claim our critical attention for just one brief moment, demanding our instantaneous emotional propulsion toward, or our repulsion away. Motility inheres both in the phenomenology of victimhood, and in its representation through cultural politics. Responding to the complex spirals and oscillations of victimhood has become intrinsic to our mediascape, which elicits visceral reactions that can coalesce into ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1961). Perhaps, as the feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has recently argued, if the 1990s were too obsessed with “recognition, recognition, recognition” (2016, 16), the 20teens,

following on from the political blows of global austerity/Brexit/Trumpism, might be latently characterised instead by a new political imperative of redistribution. A movement toward social justice provoked by the e-motion shame. Because the cultural politics of victimhood are already consigned to an asymmetry - and indeed represent a struggle to renegotiate such asymmetry – perhaps the injustice integral to victimhood might push us along a little bit toward a more redistributive social imaginary. Maybe.

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ⁱ See chapter 10, ORWELL, GEORGE. 1945. *Animal Farm*.

ⁱⁱ (typically like those that challenged men's rights to women's bodies through the anti-rape and domestic violence protests of the 1970s).

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Not even my wife knows': secret Donald Trump voters speak out'

Emails compiled by Amber Jamieson. The *Guardian* Newspaper 3rd March 2016. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/03/secret-donald-trump-voters-speak-out>

^{iv} When the victim is a straight, white, young male, such as in the case of Lee Rigby, the British soldier who was beheaded by Islamic extremists in a London street on 22nd May 2013, the injury is iconic. The neofascist organisation Britain First controversially deploys the phrase "remember Lee Rigby" (against the wishes of Rigby's mother) to mobilise Islamophobic activism. The cultural logic is that such a victim (the dead soldier/Christ) encapsulates the threat and horror of a 'religious war', and therefore seizing righteous and violent retribution is a sacred duty (against Jews, against Muslims...). It is all the more ironic of course since Jesus Christ was a Middle Eastern Jew.

^v Wikipedia is still reporting this as fact:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Year%27s_Eve_sexual_assaults_in_Germany

See also similar media reports (one of many) such as

<http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/world-economy/cologne-is-every-day-europes-rape-epidemic/news-story/e2e618e17ad4400b5ed65045e65e141d>

Accessed 27 July 2016.

The 2015/6 moral panic about ‘Muslim rapists’ was a social media phenomenon, despite later police reports that only 3 of the 58 men arrested came from Syria or Iraq.

^{vi} UNICEF provides a useful summary of research on media representations of children, with further references here:

elearning-events.ditie/unicef/html/unit1/1_5_2.htm

^{vii} The idea of the model victim is enshrined within the British legal system: for example the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority reduces compensation to any victim if they hold any unrelated criminal conviction – you are deemed to be “worth less” if you have breached the law.

^{viii} This was a very gendered attack on appropriate femininity. It is impossible to imagine a man receiving the same kind of global opprobrium for not ‘cleaning up after himself’.

^{ix} the ‘one drop rule’ comes from the history of slavery and racial classification in the USA, in which having any kind of non-white inheritance would mean a racial designation as black, or negro, in historical parlance.

^x We might also pause to wonder for a moment at the motivation of parents who tried to extinguish their daughter’s self-identity in this way.

^{xi} See for example JANE USSHER (1991, 2011), ELAINE SHOWALTER (1987) and many other feminist analyses.

^{xii} Indeed, I’m of the generation that used to watch the vaudeville classic *The Black and White Minstrel Show* with my Dad every Sunday as a child in the 1960s and ‘70s. Attitudes to minstrelsy have predominantly drawn attention to the programme’s racist stereotyping, although in a limited way it did bring black cultural forms to wider audiences.

^{xiii} Cornwall’s Darkie Days seem to stem from traditions of Mummery, however the singing of songs about ‘niggers’ seemingly draws from the appropriation of minstrelsy traditions of the Music Hall from the nineteenth century. There are rumours that Cornwall people used blackface to confuse landowners after a slave ship

was wrecked off the Cornish coast. Certainly Cornwall has a strong history of radicalism in part due to its ethnic differentiation from the English; during the nineteenth century (similar to the Irish) they could be known colloquially as ‘white niggers’. There are conflicting explanations and it is worth reading DAVEY, M.R. 2006. to get some further insight

^{xiv} There is currently a Facebook photographic meme circulating which shows a photo of Caitlyn Jenner juxtaposed with a photo of Rachel Dolezal. Overlaying Jenner is the caption “Pretending to be a woman/Must accept and approve [sic] of”; overlaying the image of Dolezal is the caption “Pretending to be Black/Unacceptable!! We Disapprove” Presumably this is anti-Trans propaganda, however I think it does point out the inconsistencies in essentializing race or gender.

^{xv} Jive Filter is a computer programme that converts plain English to a dialect “jive”, a parody of African American Vernacular English see <http://funtranslations.com/jive>

^{xvi} Thank you to Malcolm James for this point.

^{xvii} KAWASH, SAMIRA. 1997.

^{xviii} *Bildungsroman* is the novel of formation, or ‘coming of age’ story.

^{xix} Quoted in WATNEY, SIMON. 1987. p.37.

^{xx} See MUNT S.R. 2001.

^{xxi} In recent US queer theory we have seen this divergence of attitudes or orientations, so that white queers such as Lee Edelman, Jack Judith Halberstam and others seem more willing to embrace failure, loss and shame - the aesthetics of negativity you might say. Whereas queers of colour seem keen to embrace positive urges, and even utopian ones (José Muñoz, Robert Reid-Pharr and others).

^{xxii} Emily Davison was a suffragist who died at the Epsom Derby on 4 June 1913 when she was run over by the King’s horse.

^{xxiii} Gospel of Matthew 20:16, King James Bible.

^{xxiv} Thank you to Matt Brim for this observation.

^{xxv} Male migrants and refugees are often hyper-masculinized and seen as a physical threat, or feminized for their despised dependency; whereas female migrants and refugees are overtly feminized as cunning, crazy, or completely passive victims, depending on the context.

^{xxvi} Indeed, it was the considerable public response to social media and mainstream broadcast images of Alan Kurdi, that prompted me to write this article.